

## BOOKS ON MUSIC.

## CHOPIN AND CRITICISM.

FREDERIC FRANCOIS CHOPIN: by Charles Wilbey, pp. 316. \$1.00. Boston: Low, Marston & Co., and published by Charles Scribner's Sons.

FROM THE TONE WORLD: A series of Essays by Louis Ehlert. Translated from the German by Helen D. Trebil, Large Svo, pp. 327. New York: Charles F. Trebil.

STUDIES IN MODERN MUSIC: by W. H. Hadow, M. A., Large Svo, pp. 334. New York: Macmillan & Co.

The author of the new two dare not say latest biography of Chopin anticipates in his preface the objection that the bulk of the literature relating to his subject is already so large as to make its increase unnecessary. Of course he directs attention to the fact for the sake of explaining that his book is in a wholly exceptional case. With all the plethora there is still a want; and that want he gallantly essayes to fill. It is true, as Mr. Wilbey says, that a great part of what has been written about Chopin is highly colored, overdrawn, and untrustworthy. It is also true (though the circumstance is of far less moment than Mr. Wilbey seems to think) that some of the facts in Chopin's career have been truthfully related only in the last four years. If this is enough to justify a new book, then Mr. Wilbey has made out his case, so far as the privilege of publishing is concerned. But where there is already too much it is dangerous to add more; it is doubly dangerous when the subject is not of eminent importance, or when, though never so important, it has been thoroughly and ably grounded. This is the case with Chopin. Professor Niecks's two volumes, published a few years ago, have only one fault—they are too large for their subject. Chopin is a striking figure in the artistic history of the nineteenth century; but he is neither a vane nor a vague figure. In a degree which is absolutely unique in the annals of art he was a product of his environment, restricted by conditions which have never been looked upon as inspirations of great things, however stimulative they may be of individuality and refinement. In no sense was he a seer, "calling the things that are not as though they were." In his works of exquisitely beauty may be seen the operations of the most refined, subtle, sublimated fancy; but not the broadings of a deep and solemn imagination. In spite of all that rhapsodists have said they are not difficult of comprehension. The critical plummet can sound their depths in any place; and has often done so. They are the counterpart of their creator—at once the inspiration and product of the drawing-room. They are brilliant in structure, but more brilliant in ornament. They are aristocratic with a nineteenth century aristocracy, which requires gaiety attire to disclose itself. They breathe the odor of the violet, but it is the violet of the boudoirs or the perfume bottle. They are unimaginable in the attic where genius sometimes hides itself with the mystery of the struggle between the human and the divine which is carried on in the heart of humanity. They are unimaginable in the woods, or on the meadows, or on the sea, or on the mountains. Their twilight is the twilight of Elizabeth, and show ourselves once more the shaded saloon lamp. Their noonday blaze is the garish light of the ballroom.

Chopin, moreover (these things may be urged periodically), performed a great labor in perfecting piano forte technique when piano forte technique was enjoying a large share of attention in the musical world. It was the time of the culmination of a period of "virtuosity," which, as the world knows, marks the beginning of a period of creative decadence. He discovered secrets in the manipulation of the instrument which caused it to yield sensuous charms which thitherto had not been known. In this he advanced the art of piano forte composition as well as piano forte playing; for the new tones partook of the essence of the romanticism which had just passed music. But also in which were not dependent upon technic he made revelations of value—not in his neglect of the classical forms, as some would have us believe, not even in his invention and introduction of new forms, but in the newness and loveliness of the contents which he poured into the formal vessels, especially the emotional expressiveness of his harmonies.

It does not require many volumes of bottom-scraping analysis to demonstrate these things, and Mr. Niecks offered more than was necessary in his volumes. As for the story of Chopin's life, it is only in an extremely narrow sense that a contemplation of it can be said to make for good. He is lovelier by far in his music than he was in his mental and moral attributes. It is amazing how much of the biographical writing which he has called forth is explanation and extenuation of his conduct. His habitual ingratitude is softened into thoughtlessness even by Mr. Wilbey, who conceived it to be his mission to cut loose from all his predecessors save Niecks and tell the truth instead of incessantly to burn incense under the nose of the idol. From the beginning Chopin's fickleness in friendship and inconstancy in love have been excused, and he has been pictured as a clinging, sensitive creature, whose very existence depended on loving and being loved. The image has been accepted by thousands of school children of both sexes and all ages, and its crowning effulgence has been seen in the story of the intrigue with George Sand. The frequency with which he changed the object of his affection has not been permitted to interfere with the transcendental notion, but has only served to swell the chorus of sentimental commiseration. We should think that a little honest study of the characters of the two persons concerned, especially of the career of the woman and the attitude which Chopin was so willing to bear toward her, would alone serve to convince every reader of normal intellect and morals that the vast energy which Mr. Niecks devoted to discovering the cause and manner of the final separation was worse than wasted. It is a chapter of pathology and morals, not a chapter of music. The common-sense and sobriety which mark all of Mr. Wilbey's writing and rob his discussion of Chopin's music of nearly all interest are well applied here; yet we cannot recognize in his book a contribution to musical literature of first-class importance. A single essay like that devoted to the same subject in Ehlert's book outweighs the whole critical biography many times in suggestiveness and educational value.

Mrs. Trebil published her translation of Ehlert's critical essays in 1884, the year of his death. The edition before us is the second, and has been augmented by essays on Brahms, Wagner's "Parasif" and "Liszt as a Litterateur."

Ehlert was one of the most delightful writers on music that Germany has produced—a fine-feeling musician, possessed of keen discernment, a warm love for the art of which he was a professor, and master of a most sympathetic and poetical style.

Few writers on music have known better than he how to draw the line between lifeless analysis and rhapsody: few have come nearer to Schumann's conception of a musical critic as one who should be able in his writing approximately to produce the impression left by the music criticized. Never didactic, never dogmatic, even when the subject in hand was one which did not enlist his admiration: never yielding to the temptation to talk too much of the man while professing to discuss his music, but always suggestive and master of a peculiarly happy and varied list of metaphors, we know no critic better able to disclose the nature of a composer's style or the sources of musical beauty to the lay reader than he, or more capable of holding the attention and giving pleasure while imparting instruction.

In turning them into English Mrs. Trebil performed a real service to serious music-lovers, and especially to those whom circumstances have called to write on music for the newspaper press. The difficulties which embarrass the vocation of the musical critic are little understood and seldom thought of outside of the circle of those who are clearly concerned. They are set forth with clearness and a gratifying degree of literary skill by Mr. Hadow in his book in an essay which he calls "Music and Criticism: a Discourse on Method." This essay is at once the most entertaining and

most thoughtful portion of the book, though we fear that with all its clearness of expression and all its evidences of keenness of perception, it leaves the problem to which it is devoted pretty much where the writer found it. Mr. Hadow would like to give value to musical criticism, and seems to be convinced that this can only be done by discovering a basis for it which shall have philosophical solidity. Such a basis, however, is not to be drawn from analogies with the other arts, because music is in a wholly unique case. The distinction between the formal and material which obtains in all the representative arts has no existence in music. "The material side is not subordinated to the formal, but completely absorbed in it." There are no analogies for musical form in nature, come neatly no basis for comparison; consequently, also, the pre-eminent difficulty of expressing musical criticism. To help themselves out of the difficulty critics resort to technicalities which are unintelligible to the majority of readers and music-lovers, or metaphors which are frequently little better than an intrusion, or they fly to simple flat, arrogant and indefensible dogmatism. Recognition of the righteous claims of what is called Romanticism in music (that is, a restoration of the art to its primitive use as a medium of emotional expression) has emancipated criticism in these latter days from the adamantine sway which bound it before study of what we might call its natural history had come into vogue. This study has disclosed the fact, which Mr. Hadow recognizes, that there can be no finality of law in music. Since artistic music entered upon its true estate the question of its correctness and beauty cannot be determined by obedience to rule. Each rule has grown out of the arbitrary conduct of the composer. Musical law is therefore a mere temporary convention. "Nothing is wrong in music," said Schumann, "which sounds right." This is now a truism, but when it was uttered it was heresy. Where shall the critic cast an anchor so as not to drift hopelessly with any passing current? Mr. Hadow thinks there are some principles of general validity even here, and the purpose of his writing is to discover, if possible, certain psychological laws which form the code by which music is to be judged, which at least will enable critic and public to discriminate between good and bad music without any reference to system or school and with as little appeal as possible to technicalities. We cannot follow him through his argumentation, nor would we wish to enter upon a discussion with him touching the validity and appositeness of some of his illustrations. Mr. Hadow is an Englishman and a patriot. In his real he jumbles his examples in a way which is slightly confusing to readers not familiar with the doings of provincial English choral festivals are not impressed with the greatness of the works produced annually at them. Dr. C. Hubert H. Parry is, to his thinking, "a composer who is capable of restoring our (England's) national music to its true place in the art of Europe. Under his guidance and by his example it is still possible that we may rise to the position which we occupied in the time of Elizabeth, and show ourselves once more the worthy emrade and rival of the great nations ever seen."

Appreciation, pride and eagerness to encourage native products such as he possesses are, we think, not only valuable but valuable to art. Yet, when his principles of criticism come to be applied to things concrete which he cites as examples we fear that many German and American readers will think that after all criticism is not so much a matter of fixed principle as of inexplicable predilection. But here are the psychological laws which Mr. Hadow thinks have general validity, and which are certainly admirable in the abstract:

I. The Principle of Vitality, which he explains to mean spontaneity of creation and originality, accepting Ruskin's axiom that Originality is not newness, but gentleness.

II. The Principle of Labor, which is involved in the proper presentation of a proper musical thought, and is conditioned on the existence of love for the art.

III. The Principle of Proportion, in discussing which, while we agree with what Mr. Hadow says, we fear he is yet unconsciously submitting to the domination of conventionality.

IV. The Principle of Fitness, under which he discusses very trenchantly the necessity of consonance between style and form. Finally, Mr. Hadow's book is a delight. It was worth printing, and it ought to be read widely. The three remaining essays in the volume are devoted to Berlioz, Schumann and Wagner, all treated in the appreciative manner which a belief in romantic principles necessarily prompts.

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